

THE MARVEL OF TAJ: A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN BRAND POSITIONING IN TOURISM

Kalpana Bhakuni* and Sheetal Kapoor**

ABSTRACT

Brands are considered as marketer's tool for creating product differentiation which cannot be easily copied and replicated. A brand positioning can become a core competitive advantage in different perspectives of the matter. Taj Mahal is not only a monument of world repute, but it is a brand in itself. Positioning Taj Mahal as a brand involves a creative exercise listing down the ideas, benefits and features to convey to its target tourists. This paper studies the competitive advantage of brand positioning of Taj Mahal in tourism today through an empirical study, and how it should be marketed as a brand, especially through digital portals. The experiential marketing, positive brand image, virtual identity, are some of the measures to be adopted in branding the Taj. For a positioning strategy 'Taj' can be conveyed as unique brand personality of its own in Heritage tourism.

Key words: Taj, Brand, Destination Branding, Brand Positioning, Heritage Tourism.

INTRODUCTION

The Taj Mahal is a universally admired heritage monument of the world which is positioned in more than one way in the minds of tourists who visit Taj. Whether it is the mystical attraction as an epitome of love or an aesthetic catalyst with perfect symmetry, people carry an image of Taj in their minds which is unmatched so far. As per the Uttar Pradesh Tourism Department figures, around 1.61 million foreign tourists visited Agra

* Principal (Officiating), Associate Professor, Department of Geography, Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi, Delhi, bhakunik@gmail.com

** Associate Professor, Department of Commerce, Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi, Delhi, Email: sheetal_kpr@hotmail.com

in 2017, an increase by 19% from 2016. Further, the government data reveals that Taj has significantly boosted the foreign tourist arrivals in Uttar Pradesh by almost 13% in 2017. While marketing the Taj, it requires to position it as a brand, in the minds of the target market on the basis of its distinctive offering and image. Positioning is the act of designing the offering and image to occupy a distinctive place in the target market. The end result of positioning is the successful creation of a customer focused value proposition (Kotler Philip and Keller K. L. 2016). Thus, positioning Taj as a brand involves a creative exercise which involves listing down its USP to be conveyed to its target consumers. Brand positioning is statement of what the brand is in the eyes of the consumer. It involves three things who am I, how am I different from others, why buy me in preference to others (Shunu Sen, 2000).

With the rapid development of digital technologies and the increasing penetration of smart phones, cloud and internet there is a change in the consumer's buying process as of today. A tourist planning to visit Taj Mahal carries an image about it and collects information through various sources such as digital, advertising and word of mouth. Virtual tours, reading reviews, comparing destinations all this is done before actual visit to the destination. Digital marketing helps in creating value for a brand, and providing a lifetime experience about a destination where the tourist participates through a constant dialogue, sharing experiences, suggestions and responses, giving feedback for improvement, and ultimately driving other tourists to visit the destination. Thus, customer satisfaction plays a very important role in building a positive image about a brand. It is said if a customer has a good experience with a brand it may share with one person, but if it has a bad experience, it tells ten others.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study can be enlisted as follow:

1. Branding Taj Mahal as the first choice for foreign tourists by adding value in the customer value hierarchy.
2. To develop an Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) strategy for marketing Taj.

3. To define the challenges faced by various stakeholders in destination branding.
4. To provide practical implications for policy makers in India regarding branding Taj.

METHODOLOGY

This research endeavours to identify the unique selling propositions (USPs) which lead to evolving the core brand elements through a consumer survey that motivates the tourists to visit and experience the Taj. The survey is designed around the consumer perceptions that relate to the image of Taj as a destination and the aspirations of the tourists to identify with it. The survey was conducted by making use of questionnaire with a sizable number of 100 respondents, and the brand image was constructed on all that Taj as a heritage monument has to offer in the terms of sense of place as well as its core brand elements. The information thus collected was further quantified and analyzed with statistical tools to fulfill the objectives of the study.

The paper is divided into four sections linked to each other in the context of branding Taj:

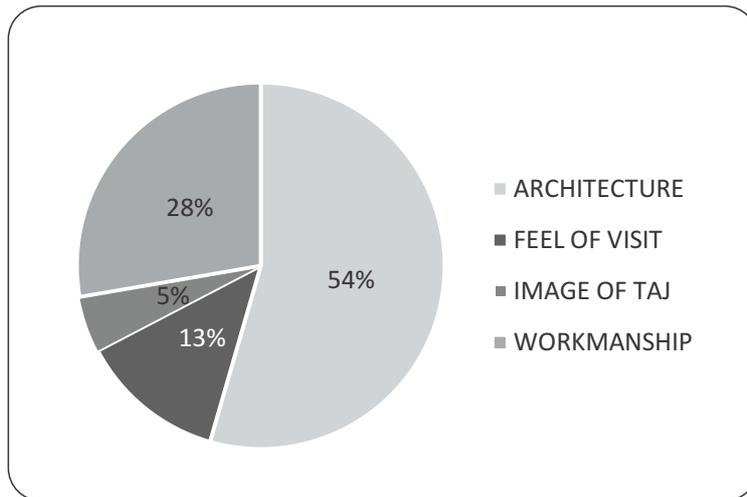
I. Branding Taj Mahal: Analysing Customer Value Hierarchy

Tourism is a reality which transpires at the perceptual plane of the tourist to begin with, much before the travel is undertaken. Hence a positive image of destination is vital which prompts arrival of the tourist. Image in conceptual terms comprises beliefs, ideas and impressions of a destination in the minds of individual. In such construct of image the elements of historical sites, climate, accessibility, natural attractions, people, culture, language, cuisine, safety, security and economy play significantly. The term 'image' may further deconstructed into two types i.e. organic and induced (Sengupta Subroto, 1994). The Organic image from non-prejudiced sources as newspapers, periodicals, television and books, or other unbiased sources as such as friends, relatives, etc. are held as more credible by people, as they relate to such information easily. Whereas, the Induced image, on the other hand, is consciously designed and generated through aggressive marketing activities to develop a carefully structured and desired impression in the minds of a target market segment. Induced images are geared at projecting the positive

and alluring aspects of the product to entice the consumers. In this context, the organic image of the Taj is so popular that further inducing it to the needs of tourism market, makes it a perfectly viable proposition for branding.

When respondents were asked what they liked the most in Taj, they attributed the top most reason for visiting Taj Mahal to its unmatched architecture and style. Other reasons given by the tourists were Taj's workmanship, its unique image and the feel of seeing it. Summarily, all these reasons contribute to the multi-dimensional personality of this celebrated monument.

Figure 1: What Tourist's Like Most in Taj

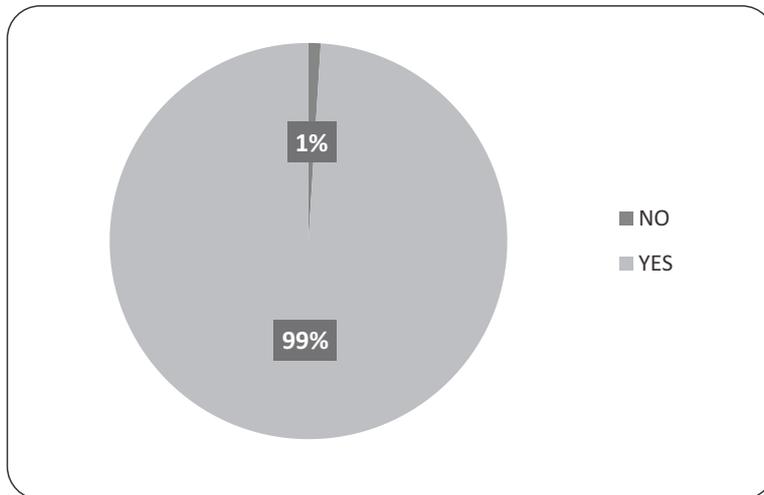


Further analysis of data shows that 54% of tourists were attracted by the architecture and style of the Taj Mahal. 28% tourists considered the exclusive workmanship which they liked in Taj. Whereas, only 13% tourists mentioned about the feel of the place which brought them to it and a small margin of 5% mentioned about the Image of Taj.

For building Taj Mahal as a brand it is necessary that the Ministry of tourism and all other concerned authorities focus on its functional elements such as architecture and workmanship, and give top priority to its conservation, preservation and maintenance.

Since the emotional brand elements such as, feel of visit and image of Taj have emerged as weak aspects in the choice of tourists, it needs a concrete image building for a positive brand recall.

Figure2: Selfie with Taj

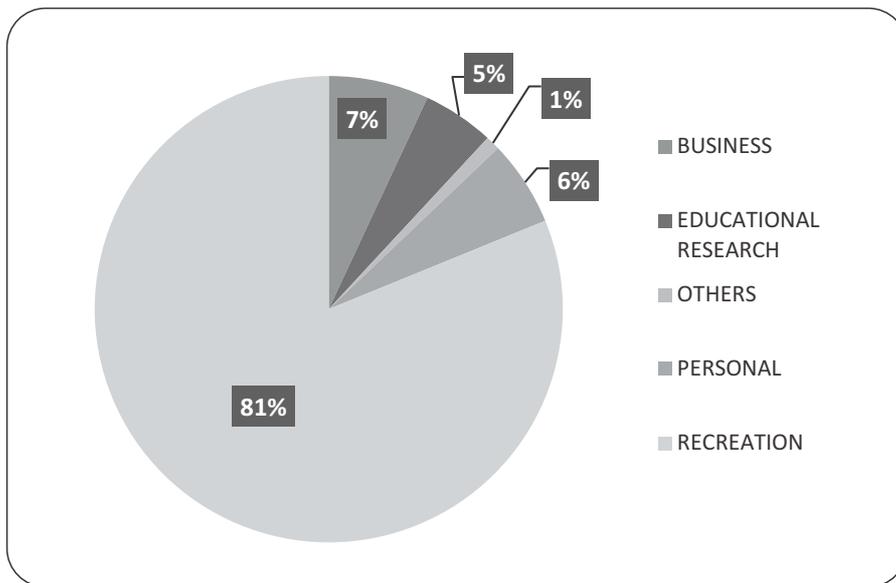


Selfie is a behavioural tool to understand the behaviour of the tourists at any given destination, where it establishes that how the image of place blends with the personality of the tourist in a single frame. When respondents were asked whether they took selfie with Taj, 99% of them responded in affirmative. In today's digital world of communication and smart phones, uploading of pictures on social media and sharing experiences with friends and relatives, bears a tremendous impact on tourism. The tourists who are happy to share the Taj experience by uploading the selfie with Taj, become brand ambassadors in their own right which can attract more tourists to visit that place, and this can help in generating diverse opinion leaders and spontaneous marketing of Taj as a brand.

II. An Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) strategy for marketing Taj

IMC helps in recognising the added value of a comprehensive plan and helps in synergising channels in order to create a lasting message. Such a plan evaluates the strategic role of a variety of communication disciplines, such as, advertising response, sales promotion and public relations, and combines these disciplines to provide clarity, consistency and maximum impact through the seamless integration of discrete messages (Kotler, Philip, et. al. 2011). In 2002, international branding of India took place with a very successful campaign 'Incredible India', which made India a tourism juggernaut (Kant, Amitabh, 2009). In order to develop an IMC strategy, the respondents were asked the reason or the purpose for visiting Taj Mahal.

Figure 3: Purpose of Visit



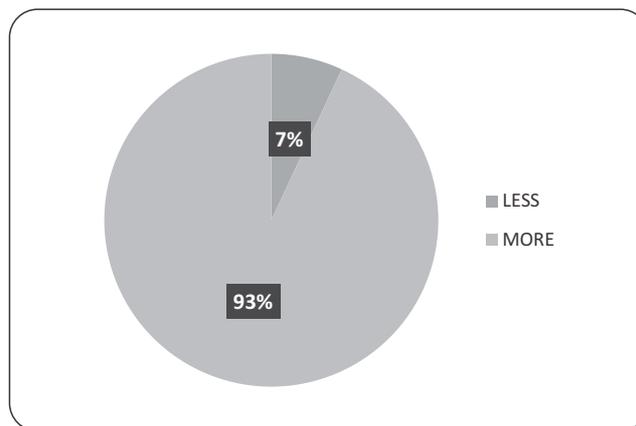
81% respondents mentioned recreation/enjoyment as the reason to visit Taj. The other less significant reasons as mentioned by them, were business (7%), personal (6%), educational research (5%) and others (1%). This has a huge implication in the terms of communication strategy. Since majority of tourists come to Taj for pleasure and relaxing,

it should be positioned in accordance with this brand identity. Marketing communication tools can play an important role in communicating the brand identity to tourists so as to create a distinctive image through well-conceived advertising campaigns endorsed by celebrities or public influencers.

III. Challenges faced in Branding Taj

In destination branding, the access to the location plays an important role. Pollution, poor infrastructure, health and safety hazards, harsh weather, poor hygiene and sanitation and petty crimes are some factors which can have detrimental impact on a brand. Thus, the expectations of the tourists and the brand identity created through integrated marketing communication should match with the actual experience. If it does not match and if there is a cognitive dissonance, then chances of losing brand value may happen. When the tourists visit Taj, they look forward to an enjoyable and positive experience. The survey analyzed the tourist's response towards access, cleanliness and also, whether the Taj could meet the travelers' expectations.

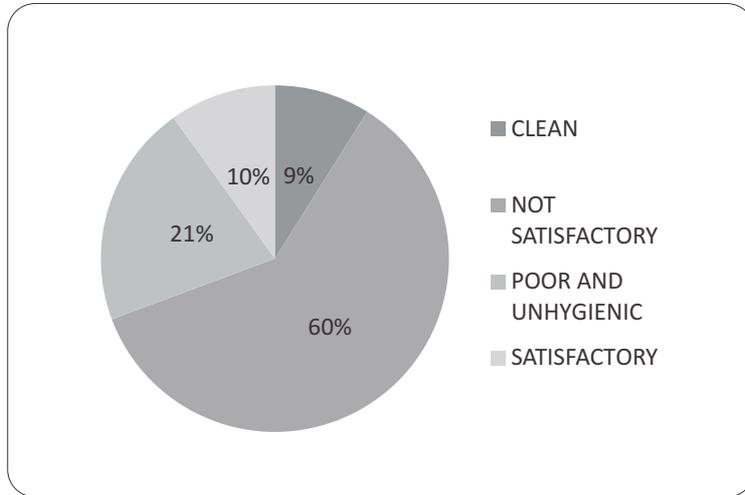
Figure-4: Tourists access to Taj in terms of crowd



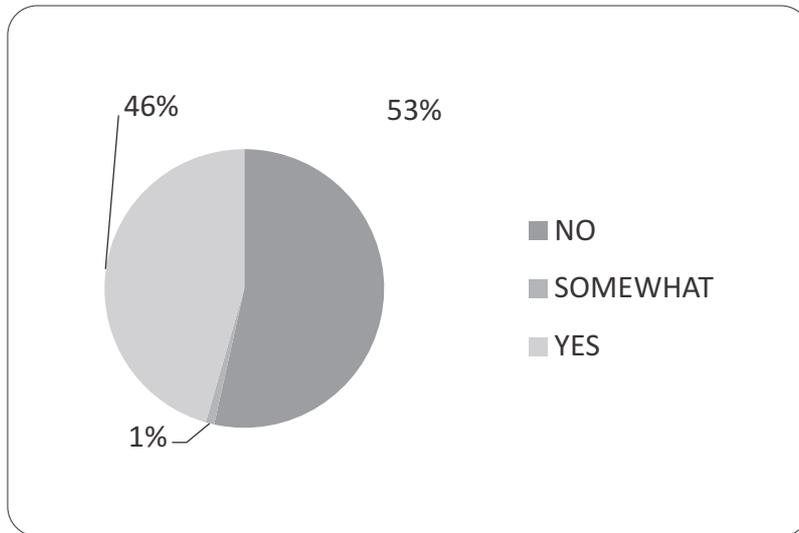
The tourists approach the Taj with the image of glossy close-ups of the monument in their mind. 93% of tourists mentioned that they found approach to Taj and inside the monument much crowded than they imagined. In such a situation they may feel

disillusioned and disconnected to the brand image. In this regard the authorities must protect the brand image by implementing an efficient crowd management and a hassle free visit to this heritage monument.

Figure 5: Tourist's Response to Cleanliness as a basic factor



Regardless of abundant attractions, the negative images that have conjured in the minds of the tourists, based on their experience, send out indications to the tourism authorities and government that there is an imperative need to address the primary concern of providing proper hygiene and clean environment at a destination of global repute. A big proportion of respondents found the Taj Complex with poor sanitation and hygiene, and many of them were not satisfied on this account. For any branding the basic requirement such as cleanliness marks the bottom-line of the strategy.

Figure-6: Taj meeting the Tourist's Expectations

Taj Mahal stands testimony to the immense love and grief of Shah Jahan, the Mughal emperor for his beloved wife Mumtaz. The Nobel prize winning poet Rabindranath Tagore called it 'a teardrop on the cheek of time'. This fantasy of profound mortal love draws scores of people to this monument. But it emerges as a startling fact in this survey, that more than half of the tourists (53%) found the Taj experience not up to their expectations. Thus, it is evident that the brand promise of the Taj fails to deliver to a large extent. This involves investing heavily in branding to justify the sense of the place and eventually, delivering the brand promise.

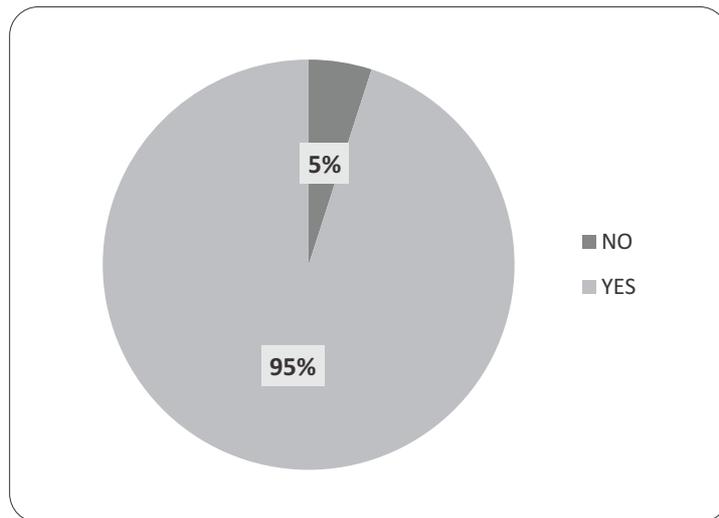
IV. Recommendation for Policy Makers

The strength of the brand can be measured in terms of its brand equity. Customer-based brand equity is defined as the differential impact of brand knowledge on customer response to the marketing of the brand. Thus, the key element which affects brand equity are the brand knowledge, which comprises of two constituents: brand awareness and brand image (Keller, 1993). When tourists were asked whether they would like to visit Taj Mahal again, or recommend it to friends and their perception regarding Taj as a

brand, their responses were as follow:

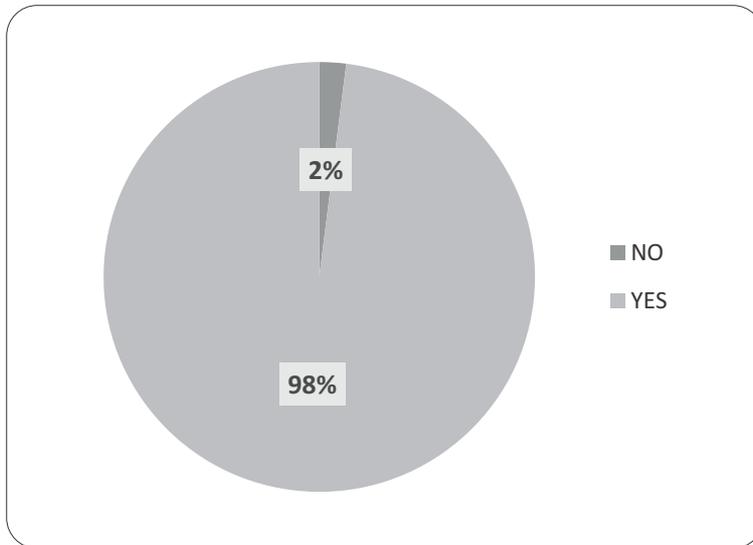
Visiting Taj Again: It emerges as yet another interesting fact that despite tourist's Taj experience not scaling up to their expectations, majority (95%) of the tourists mentioned that they would like to visit Taj again. The brand managers should make use of such communication, a feel good association with the brand as a positive indication. This type of association revolves around the 'reflection' and 'self-image' facets of brand identity.

Figure-7: Visiting Taj Again



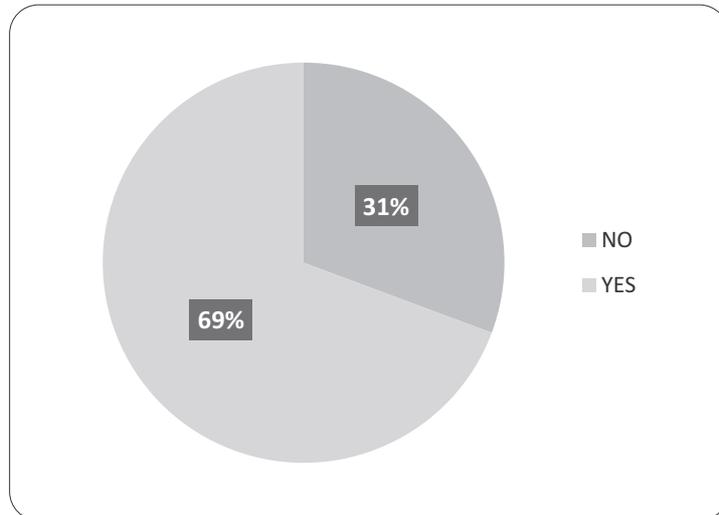
As seen in the survey, 95% of tourists would like to visit Taj again whereas only 5% tourists responded in negative. Though the functional element of the monument plays an important role in brand preference but the emotional element i.e., sharing experiences, uploading happy moments emerge significant, particularly, in brand recall.

Figure-8: Recommending Taj to Friends



Recommending Taj to friends: An analysis of the tourist's response regarding recommending the Taj to friends shows that almost all respondents have mentioned that they would recommend Taj to their family and friends. It is this factor which can be capitalized by the brand strategists of Taj. It also shows that a diverse consumer profiles can be reached by such positive impulse.

Figure-9: Tourist Perception Regarding Taj as a Brand



Tourist Perception Regarding Taj as a Brand: When 31% of tourists mentioned that they did not perceive Taj as a brand, it is a wake-up call for the authorities to work on the brand strategy of 'Taj'. The emotional element for communication for positioning, has been found to be the most influential in facilitating brand recall by creating happy moments around Taj and also promoting sufi music, cuisines, costumes, antics of Mughal era and other soft culture items and souvenirs which visitor's might like to buy online as souvenirs. The website and the social media channels should be dynamic and any comments by tourists should be reviewed and responded promptly with partnership of the Corporate. The brand may be simply marketed as- your 'Taj moment'!

CONCLUSION

It is the marvel of Taj that has emerged as a competitive advantage of branding the Taj Mahal as a destination of heritage value with universal appeal. It may be required to redefine its brand values to rediscover its brand identity with contemporary relevance, because sustaining competitive advantage through brand positioning is a complex process in the context of such heritage sites. It needs to satisfy the tourists, upkeep the

unique selling propositions of a monument built hundreds of years back and a forward looking brand strategy to make it a global brand in the best interest of Indian tourism.

REFERENCES

Business Today (2018) “Tourists Footfall in Uttar Pradesh more than its Population in 2017”, 5th April.

Kant, Amitabh, (2009) *Branding India: An Incredible Story*, 1st Ed. Noida: Collins Business, 1-65.

Keller, Kevin Lane (1993), “Conceptualising, Measuring and Managing Customer-Based Brand Equity”, *Journal of Marketing*. 57 (1), 1-22.

Kotler, Philip and Kevin Lane Keller. (2016) *Marketing Management*, 15th Ed., New Delhi: Pearson, 296-361.

Kotler, Philip, Kevin Lane Keller, Koshy Abraham and Mithleshwar Jha. (2013). *Principles of Marketing: A South Asian Perspective*, 13th Ed. New Delhi: Pearson, pp. 463-469.

Sengupta, Subroto, (1994). *Brand Positioning: Strategies for Competitive Advantage*, 5th Ed. New Delhi: Tata McGraw-Hill, 1-16.

Sen, Shunu, (2000) “On Branding”. The Hindu-Business Line, 6th April.

